
NEWS LOCAL

James McCrie lone Lambtonian on the Titanic when it sank in 1912

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QMI Agency

The 100th anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic is on Sunday, April 15 and one of the passengers lost at sea in 1912 was Lambton County's James Matthew McCrie.

He was an oil rig worker who had worked in Arabia and been sightseeing in Europe, but learned his wife Maude (nee Brown) in Sarnia was sick and was coming back home on the Titanic.

After the ship hit an iceberg four days into its maiden voyage from Southampton, England to New York, it sank in the early hours of April 15, 1912 with the loss of 1,517 lives. McCrie's body was not recovered.

The "unsinkable" luxury liner's final resting place is 3,780 metres under the North Atlantic, in international waters; and there are efforts to declare the site as a protected maritime memorial.

Connie Bell, current supervisor of the Oil Museum of Canada, said "We have very little on McCrie, basically from previous newspaper accounts. Our connection is that he was a foreign oil driller and we have the photograph showing him sitting with a group of several other foreign drillers dressed in their white suits, - as well as the white coat that belonged to Gus Slack who is referred to in this story."

She said the museum is not planning anything specific at this time on McCrie or the Titanic but added the McCrie story and photo are on permanent display along with the Slack coat.

"We only plan to add a notation within the display that it is the 100th anniversary of the Titanic sinking," said Bell.

In the days after the Titanic sank, millions of people waited to see the survivors' list. Most of the Canadians aboard the ship were from Winnipeg and Montreal. But McCrie's wife and three daughters also waited anxiously in Sarnia to learn about his fate.

McCrie, the son of Matthew McCrie and Roxana (Harrington) McCrie, appears to have been the only local man on the maiden voyage of the Titanic. He was 33 years old when he sailed on the largest ship the world had ever seen. His family hadn't seen McCrie for about 18 months since he had been hired by a foreign company to drill for oil in Egypt. He had taken several such trips over the years.

Like hundreds of foreign drillers from Lambton, he returned home periodically before heading off for other work.

His niece, Pauline Bruton, lived on Rokeby Line and wasn't born when the luxury liner went down on April 15, 1912. But she recalled her father, Jack McCrie, talking about his brother.

"My dad said Jim was so interesting, that he would come back home from those trips and tell so many good stories."

How McCrie got passage on the Titanic is a mystery.

One account says he booked a first-class seat on another ship, the Adriatic, but that ship was stuck because of a coal strike and the coal from that ship was transferred to the Titanic, on which McCrie was a second-class passenger. He boarded in Southampton, England on April 10, 1912.

Bruton tells a story she remembered from her childhood.

"I heard the company gave him a ticket on the Titanic as a bonus," she said.

Her brother, Bill McCrie, recalled a similar tale that suggests his uncle demanded a ticket on the boat as "one of the perks of the job."

But the most likely story is documented at the Oil Museum of Canada in Oil Springs, where a photograph of McCrie and his colleagues is on display. McCrie is identified as a Mandaumin driller in the photo. He sits near a Petrolia driller named Gus Slack who was supposedly with him in Southampton. The two men were on furlough and Slack had a ticket on the Titanic.

"We think Gus Slack offered James McCrie his ticket because James's wife was ill," said Donna McGuire, the Oil Museum's supervisor in 1997. "At the time, all the tickets were sold out but Gus decided to go visit a friend somewhere in England and give up his ticket."

On April 19, 1914, The Sarnia Weekly Observer reported "Mrs. McCrie has not received any information...and grave fears are entertained that Mr. McCrie may have been one of the passengers on the ill-fated steamer."

No article was printed when the McCrie family finally got word he was not among the survivors. But the community rallied to help the widow and her girls.

Bruton said she has fond memories of McCrie's widow, Maude, who often visited her home and attended family reunions after her husband's death. She raised her daughters, Irene, Frances and Elsie, on her own and never remarried. Eventually, all four moved to Michigan and contact was lost, said Bruton.

Several distant cousins, nieces and nephews remained in Sarnia-Lambton but none had any photos or memorabilia.

A second Bill McCrie of Sarnia was a distant cousin and said no babies in the McCrie family were named James for several generations. "It was probably superstition," he said

- With QMI Agency files from the July 19, 1997 issue of The Observer.